TERRY HEATHCOTE – OXFORD SCIENTIFIC FILMS/AUSCAPE

Long symmetrical tails might be sexy for Barn Swallows in Europe, but not necessarily in North America.

developed and capable of self-care than most other birds. But they eventually form groups with chicks of a similar age, indicating they can recognise their own kind. To understand how, Ann Göth and Christopher Evans (Macquarie University) exposed hatchlings to the controlled behaviours of life-like robotic chicks wearing feathers and skins from birds that had succumbed to natural deaths (*J. Exp. Biol.* 207: 2199).

When the mechanical chicks were pecking, the real chicks joined them, mimicking their behaviour and even trying to steal their food, but they largely ignored robots performing other actions. And it wasn't only the eating action that attracted the chicks. When UV light was removed from the pecking robots, they failed to incite much interest.

The researchers believe megapodes may be born with an innate ability to recognise a special UV signal emitted by fellow chicks. This may be invisible to potential predators and only recognised by other chicks when combined with the action of eating.

—K.McG.

Sexual Selection and the City

Typical. You put all that effort into growing a beautiful long, symmetrical tail, only to discover that tails are, like, so last season!

The elongate tail streamers of the European Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica rustica*) have long been held up as a classic example of sexual selection. Longer, more symmetrical tails offer both male and female swallows a reproductive advantage. But apparently this is one more case where European fashion hasn't translated very well across the Atlantic.

Rebecca Safran and Kevin McGraw (Cornell University) studied North American Barn Swallows (*H. r. erythrogaster*) in New York. They captured male and female swallows during the first two weeks of the breeding season and measured the length and symmetry of their tail streamers. They also removed a few of the rust-coloured feathers from each bird's throat, breast, belly and vent, and measured how bright they were. They then determined when pairs began breeding, how many times they nested, and the number of chicks they fledged.

When they analysed the data, they found that, unlike in European swallows, tail length and symmetry had little effect on the onset of breeding or reproductive success. Feather colouration, on the other hand, was correlated with both—more colourful birds tended to breed earlier and more often and to have more offspring (*Behav. Ecol.* 15: 455).

The researchers suggest that this sort of geographic variation in sexual signalling—animals in different regions finding different things sexy—could lead to the divergence of populations, which in turn could lead to speciation.

—G.T.

FURTHER READING

References for the stories that have appeared in this edition of Nature Strips are available online:

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